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TAGS: [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [EAID](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PK](#) [PAS](#)

SUBJECT: PAKISTAN EARTHQUAKE: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA

Classified By: DCM Patricia Butenis, derived from DSCG 05-01, b and d

11. (C) The isolation of many areas impacted by the October 8 earthquake has long afforded Islamist politicians and conservative religious clerics an uncritical audience for their at times extremist worldviews, in which America (or the West) as enemy of Islam featured prominently. Anecdotal evidence suggests that prominent American and other Western assistance to earthquake victims is chipping away at the heretofore unquestioned acceptance of this worldview and may be isolating its proponents on the ground. According to civil society contacts, the presence of international relief workers is uniformly welcomed in these areas. Anti-American or anti-Western sentiment has largely been abandoned in the face of overwhelming need.

12. (SBU) Contacts report that a handful of extremist clergy have attempted to thwart this pervasive change in attitude towards outsiders. In some villages, religious leaders have spoken against accepting aid from any source other than Islamic donors and have pressed GOP, military, and private Pakistani NGOs to refuse supplies donated by the West. Their entreaties have been ignored. Even the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the parent organization of designated foreign terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Tayyaba) have gratefully accepted supplies for their relief camps from whatever the source. A few stories of religious leaders going even further have emerged. In one case, a local cleric railed against accepting American relief goods that had recently arrived in the village by U.S. military helicopter. He then attempted to place himself between villagers and the much needed supplies. NGO sources reported that his own followers removed him, thrashed him, and then began to distribute the supplies to appreciative villagers.

13. (C) During recent iftar dinners with civil society and NGO representatives, poloff inquired whether this change in attitude would endure after relief and reconstruction efforts cease. The view on NWFP districts was mixed. Some felt the assistance provided would be remembered, particularly if the USG actively engages in reconstruction of important community institutions like schools or health centers. Others argued that cultural/religious traditions in this part of the NWFP mandated subservience to religious leaders. Ignoring such leaders in a crisis was possible, but over the long term, clerics would reestablish their firm grip on public opinion. In Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK), all interlocutors believed that the changes were irreversible. They attributed the clerics' hold on AJK to the area's isolation from the rest of Pakistan; the region's military sensitivity led the GOP to limit travel to AJK by foreigners and Pakistanis alike. Due to the earthquake, the military had opened the floodgates to facilitate relief and reconstruction. Shutting them again would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

14. (C) Comment: The anecdotal evidence available suggests that public perception of the USG in the earthquake-impacted areas is changing for the better. The endurance of this shift in public opinion will largely be determined by the durability of American engagement through the reconstruction phase and the success of such reconstruction in more firmly tying these previously isolated regions to Pakistan.

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